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By historical precedent and state legislation, community colleges are and will continue to be open-door colleges. They are properly viewed as the means of providing educational opportunity for all, including the low achiever. The open-door policy, however, will be valid only if students can achieve their goals. Their success will determine whether the door is really open or merely revolving. Community colleges must therefore determine what low-achieving students are going to learn in remedial programs, the conditions of learning, and how the learning can be evaluated. Boards of trustees and parents can put pressure on both administrators and instructors to evaluate their efforts with the low achiever. This evaluation is essential if only to show the general ineffectiveness of current developmental or remedial programs. Junior colleges will have to face the challenge of demonstrated student learning as the one criterion for the success of any program for the low achiever. In short, the open-door policy is justified only if the college provides valuable educational experiences for all students admitted and makes student learning a major institutional goal. (HH)

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The Open-Door College: The Problem of the Low Achiever

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The Open-Door College: The Problem of the Low Achiever

Consistent with the American tradition of educational opportunity for all, legislation in most states has established an open-door admissions policy for community junior colleges. As a result of this legislation, community colleges in most states must admit all high school graduates and adults who seek admission. Indeed, a nationwide investigation found that 91 per cent of the junior colleges surveyed admit all high school graduates and other persons over eighteen who can profit from the instruction.[1]

Much has been claimed for the open-door college. It has been asserted that community junior colleges "salvage" human resources,[2] afford individuals a second chance,[3] and implement the American dream of "universal education for all."[4] Some writers have considered the community college as democracy's college.[5] Proponents of the open door have insisted that the community college, with its willingness to offer courses below the collegiate level, has been the salvation of the low-achieving student.[6]

The composition of the community junior college student body has changed drastically in the past twenty years. Formerly the students were a select group resolved to finish collegiate preparation for well-defined purposes; today, in contrast, community college students are much more representative of the total population, mentally, socially, and economically. Community college student bodies are thus more heterogeneous than ever before. And along with reports of increased heterogeneity come indications that an increasing proportion of full-time students in community colleges are low achievers.[7]

Low-achieving students usually are identified by standardized test

[1]Robert F. Schenz, "What Is Done for Low Ability Students?" *Junior College Journal*, XXXIV (May, 1964), p. 22.

[2]Michael N. Sugarman, "What About the Dropouts?" *Michigan Education Journal*, XLIV (April, 1967), p. 43.

[3]Clyde E. Blocker, Robert H. Plummer, and Richard C. Richardson, Jr., *The Two-Year College: A Social Synthesis* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 274.

[4]Florida State Department of Education, *The Community Junior College in Florida's Future* (Tallahassee: The Department, 1957), pp. 2–3.

[5]*American Junior Colleges*, 6th ed., edited by Edmund J. Gleazer, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1963), pp. 3–6.

[6]Blocker, *op. cit.*, pp. 270–72.

[7]Schenz, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

scores and high school grades. If a student scores in the low percentile ranges of entrance and placement tests, he is generally designated a low achiever. In addition, many institutions use his grade-point average or rank in graduating class or both as another criterion for assessing the student's probable achievement.

Low-achieving students enter the community college for a variety of reasons. Some do not decide on college early enough in high school to meet selective admissions requirements. Others become motivated too late. Some students have such low academic potential that there is little chance that they can succeed in regular college courses. For whatever reasons these students enroll in the community college, the institution is charged with providing educational programs to accommodate their diverse abilities and interests. The open-door concept of admissions has validity only if these students are able to succeed in their educational objectives.

Since the mid-1950's there has been evidence of a growing concern for the low-achieving student in the community junior college. He is now the unique problem of the two-year college, and by his numbers and his problems, will become more conspicuous as society presses for continued education beyond the high school.

Statistics on the low-achieving student are not comprehensive. The figures available, however, attest to the acuteness of the problem. A California state survey of the 270,000 freshmen who entered public junior colleges in the fall of 1965 reported that nearly 70 per cent failed the qualifying examination for English 1A (or the equivalent transfer course).[8] Of the 60,600 students enrolled in California public junior college mathematics classes in the fall of 1964, three out of four were taking courses offered in the high school.[9] National studies likewise reflect large percentages of community college students enrolled in remedial courses.

The courses and curricular programs community junior colleges have established to accommodate the low-achieving student usually have the purpose of remediation; a less frequent purpose is development. "Remedial" and "developmental" are often used interchangeably, despite a subtle difference in the actual meaning of the terms. "Remedial" implies the improvement of student skills in order that he might enter a program for which he is currently ineligible. "Developmental" implies the improvement of skills or attitudes without reference to his eligibility for another program.

Because of the recency of developmental programs, research on their effectiveness is virtually nonexistent. Although the course most offered in California junior colleges is remedial English, there is a paucity of evidence even on the efforts at remediation.

[8]Richard M. Bossone, *Remedial English Instruction in California Public Junior Colleges* (Sacramento, California: State Department of Education, 1966), p. 2.

[9]Carol Kipps, "Basic Arithmetic Offered in California Public Junior Colleges" (doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1966), p. 8.

Community junior colleges report little research regarding the success or failure of low-achieving students who are forced to enroll in remedial programs. With little or no encouragement to investigate the problems of the low achiever, these institutions have tended to implement courses and programs in a trial-and-error fashion, hoping that students will succeed, but having little evidence that they will.

By far the majority of students who enroll in remedial courses fail to complete the course satisfactorily and are doomed to failure or forced to terminate their education. A statewide investigation of students enrolled in remedial English classes in California public junior colleges found that from 40 to 60 per cent earned a grade of *D* or *F*. In a typical California public junior college, 80 per cent of entering students enrolled in remedial English, but only 20 per cent of them were later matriculated in regular college English classes.[10] The attrition rate in remedial mathematics is similarly high. Other research indicates that as many as 75 per cent of low-achieving students withdraw from college the first year.[11]

Low-achieving students assigned to remedial courses either believe or hope that they will eliminate deficiencies and eventually pursue their intended educational program. Available research leads to the conclusion that either low-achieving students have unrealistic educational goals or the existing remedial programs are failing to correct their educational deficiencies. In the California example, of the low-achieving students enrolled in remedial English courses, 74 per cent planned to transfer to a four-year college or university. The students in this investigation believed that the open door would provide the means for attaining their educational objectives. They had enrolled in courses designed to make them eligible for college credit English courses; yet the hard facts meant low grades, failure, and attrition for them.[12] The little available research indicates a real gap between the aspirations of low-achieving students and the success they achieve.

Critics of the open-door policy are concerned with what actually happens to the low-achieving student. Attrition rates in community colleges are alarming. It is precisely this enormous attrition rate that has led critics to refer cynically to the open door as a revolving door.

Some writers have argued that low-achieving students are duped or "conned" into entering the community college. These students are led to believe that all previous failures are forgiven and that their prospects for success are favorable if they enter. The following bit of satire characterizes the problem succinctly:

> Come to us and adjust to life. Bloom early or bloom late. Or drop out without blooming if you must. But do walk through our "open door" and expose yourself to higher education.[13]

[10]Bossone, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
[11]Schenz, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–27.
[12]Bossone, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
[13]Garlyn A. Basham, "Legalized Loitering in California Junior Colleges," *Journal of Secondary Education*, XXXVI (April, 1961), p. 203.

The open-door concept is valid only if low-achieving students are provided programs of accommodation. At present the only tenable value seems to be that enrollment in a community college allows a low-achieving student to say, years after his short tenure, "I went to college." Except for this inestimable benefit, little else is apparent.

Community colleges are and will continue to be open-door colleges. Historical precedent and state legislation have well established the ideal of educational opportunity for all people. Community colleges are properly viewed as the means by which this goal can be attained. It is obvious that, as four-year institutions and universities raise entrance standards and tend to assume less responsibility for low-achieving students, the community colleges, with their open-door admissions policies, are going to be forced to assume more of this responsibility. The open-door policy will be valid only if students are able to achieve their educational goals. Student achievement is the end to which community colleges must direct their attention if the door is to be "open," but not "revolving." Perhaps this means that community colleges must now determine what low-achieving students are going to learn in remedial programs, the conditions of learning, and how this learning can be evaluated.

No easy solution can be offered to the ever increasing number of low-achieving students. If boards of trustees and parents do not raise embarrassing questions about the success or failure of students in remedial courses, there will be little pressure on administrators and instructors to evaluate their endeavors with low-achieving students. Yet evaluation of the remedial program is essential, if for no other reason than the knowledge that current efforts with the low-achieving student are ineffective. We believe that community colleges can no longer assume that remedial courses "remedy" student deficiencies. Rather, it becomes increasingly clear that two-year colleges are going to have to accept the challenge of demonstrated student learning as the one criterion for the success of any program for the low achiever. This challenge is based on the premise that junior colleges should provide valuable educational experiences for all students enrolled, and that student learning is a major institutional goal.

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